

Stockton Record

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Mentoring successes give leaders promise for future student recruits

STOCKTON - Eric McCants stood before his peers in the Alpha Phi Alpha African American Male Mentor program on Monday and told his story.

The 18-year-old Bear Creek High School senior said as a freshman he had a 1.5 grade point average and he was making bad decisions. Then, he became involved in the mentoring program and it turned him around and set him on the right path.

"I was messing around, and I'm still feeling the ramifications of that now," he told the group of high school and junior high school students from Lodi Unified. "I'm graduating, but I had to work through adult school just to get my grades up."

McCants will graduate with a 3.14 GPA, something he credits in large part to the youth program led by Stockton resident Lester Patrick and the Alpha Phi Alpha Fraternity that serves students at Bear Creek, Delta Sierra Middle School and McAuliffe Middle School in north Stockton.

Monday's ceremony celebrating the program's success marks the fifth year of the program's existence in teaching black students to make good decisions, cope with stress and other leadership skills.

Patrick said the group is led by men in the community who work with the high school students, who in turn work with the middle school students. Along the way, the group has taken trips to the state Capitol and other destinations. They've listened to motivational speeches from the

likes of former Pittsburgh Steelers star Mike Merriweather.

McCants has been in the program for four years.

"I just wanted to keep it going to help other people like the help I received," he said.

Guest speakers Monday at McAuliffe included Rep. Jerry McNerney, D-Stockton; Stockton Mayor Ann Johnston and Chairman Steve Bestolarides of the San Joaquin County board of supervisors.

McNerney gave a speech telling the students to make the most of their time.

"When you have something you have to do, do it. Don't put it off," he said.

Johnston said she was wowed that when she attended the group's first meeting five years ago there were 15 people involved. About 75 received recognition Monday.

Bestolarides told the students he came from an immigrant family. He told them to always look people in the eye when they shake hands "because you are as good as they are" and to treat people like a gentleman "not because they are, but because you are."

Students in the program said it has helped them become confident and detach themselves from the stigma that black teenagers make poor lifestyle decisions.

"It's cool to talk with important people. It makes me feel important," said Bear Creek junior Correy Loggins, 16.

